



# Workplace Loneliness

**Solutions for the growing epidemic**





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Reventure Ltd is a not-for-profit organisation designed as a think-tank to undertake research and stimulate public debate and solutions about workplace matters.



Converge International was established in Australia in the 1960s to provide a range of specialist human resource services.

**mccrindle**

McCrindle are researchers in human behaviour, market and social trends.

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As the Managing Director of Reventure Ltd, Dr McMillan is charged with undertaking research, raising public debate and helping to renew workplaces for the future.

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It is this practical experience in a range of leadership roles that drives Dr McMillan to work with CEOs and their workplaces to strive for greater job satisfaction, true meaning and purpose, and optimal performance.

Dr McMillan holds a Doctor of Health Services (Psychology), a Master of Education and a Bachelor of Health Administration.

He is a recipient of an OAM for services to Australians with disabilities through a range of health organisations and employee assistance programs. He is a Churchill Fellow and a recipient of a Rotary International Foundation Fellowship.



# Executive Summary

## Australians spend more than half of their waking hours at work, so it is now time we look at what we can improve in Australian workplaces to end loneliness.

In our nation's vernacular, we often refer to Australia as the 'lucky country'. On the surface, one would be hard pressed to challenge this. Australians are more educated than ever before, our nation continues to experience years of economic growth, we are more mobile, and our collective wealth is at an all-time high.

As we brace ourselves for what many are referring to as the fourth industrial revolution, it is timely to assess whether we Australians still live in the 'lucky country'.

Commentators have observed there is a growing epidemic of loneliness. In fact, this trend is appearing overseas with many labelling this a major public health epidemic.

Loneliness can be defined as being disconnected from others and seeing one's relationships negatively. So, one can feel lonely in a crowd, and yet surrounded by others. It can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.

In Australia, this trend is also being observed. However, very few commentators have drawn a connection between this public health epidemic and its impact on the workplace. Until now.

Reventure, through *a future that works* campaign, has conducted research into the growing epidemic of loneliness in Australian workplaces. In this first-of-its-kind report, *Workplace Loneliness*, I am pleased to present practical workplace solutions to end this epidemic and create sustainable workplaces for the future. Importantly, this report appreciates there is a concerning link between workplace loneliness and mental health, and presents an urgent case for change.

People who experience loneliness make more mistakes at work, take more sick leave, feel less inclined to join in and are not easily approachable in the workplace. Trite and artificial attempts to foster social connection between colleagues, for example through hosting workplace drinks on a Friday night, fail

to address the fundamental underlying human need to find meaning in what we do, to experience genuine and authentic relationships, and to grow as individuals through satisfying work.

Social connection at work is more than just being happy at work. Humans can easily fake happiness. Instead, it is about contentment and doing good work. The two are not mutually exclusive.

It is everyone's responsibility to look out for people who may feel socially isolated. Global research has discovered the average person spends more than 90,000 hours in their lifetime at work. So, workplaces can and should take a leading role in designing and implementing support systems and structures to reduce and end loneliness.

**Dr Lindsay McMillan OAM**  
*a future that works*

[www.afuturethatworks.org.au](http://www.afuturethatworks.org.au)



## Workplace Loneliness in Australia

### Loneliness is a public health epidemic

Loneliness is when you feel disconnected from others and see one's relationships as negative. So, one can feel lonely in a crowd, and surrounded by others.



Women and men experience loneliness equally.

**15%** of people experiencing loneliness are more likely to be depressed.

Young adults have more social anxiety than older people.

**48%** of people in Australia are lonely.

### Workers experience loneliness at an alarming rate

Loneliness can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.



40% of lonely workers feel less productive.



38% of lonely workers report making more mistakes.



36% of lonely workers report getting sick more often.

**90,000** hours are spent at work each year by workers.

**37%** of Australians feel lonely at work... and it's growing.

### Modern ways of working contribute to loneliness

The way we work today is causing loneliness and now the workplace needs to be part of the solution.

**49%** of those that are lonely are more likely to withdraw from their colleagues.

**47%** of those that are lonely are more likely to suffer poor wellbeing.

**46%** of lonely workers believe they do not align with their company's vision and values.



Loneliness can have the same effect on someone's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.



Lonely workers are twice as likely to look for a new job in the next 12 months.



More than a quarter of workers notice people in their workplace experiencing loneliness.

## Workplaces must be part of the solution



Half of Australia's workers believe that a leader is responsible for whether team members feel lonely.



Half of lonely workers feel it is HR's responsibility to foster social connections in the workplace.

### YET...



Only 9% of workers feel comfortable talking to HR about relationship concerns in the workplace.

# 1/3

of workers believe workplaces should facilitate a culture of engagement and social interaction.



"People are crying out for an end to loneliness. We must all strive to be better neighbours, friends and colleagues. Everyone has a role to play."

*Dr Lindsay McMillan a future that works*

**37%** of  
Australians  
feel lonely  
at work.



# Loneliness is an increasing global concern



## **International commentators and governments overseas are responding to this global health concern.**

The public health epidemic of loneliness has been researched and discussed internationally, labelled a “growing health epidemic”<sup>1</sup> by the former United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. He equated social isolation or feeling alone “with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day.”

Governments overseas have listened to these concerns and are responding.

The UK Government has appointed the world’s first Minister for Loneliness. When Prime Minister Theresa May announced the new Minister’s appointment, she said “for far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life”.<sup>2</sup>

The Prime Minister has implemented the government’s first loneliness strategy to enable ‘social prescribing’, allowing GPs to refer patients to community workers and voluntary services to help improve their health and wellbeing, rather than resorting to medical interventions.

In addition, the Prime Minister announced the first ever ‘Employer Pledge’ to tackle workplace loneliness. This has garnered interest from high-profile organisations in the UK to take action to support their workers’ health and social wellbeing.

## **There is still a way to go for Australians to understand the extent of this growing public health epidemic.**

Commentary in Australia around loneliness is somewhat limited. There has been very little focus on the implications of loneliness for Australian workplaces.

Broad analysis of loneliness across Australia includes the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University’s *Australian Loneliness Report* (2018),<sup>3</sup> a survey that explores the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and wellbeing. The survey unpacks some concerning findings, including that anxiety about social interactions is common among adults, Australians are not well connected to their neighbours, and that higher levels of loneliness are associated with higher levels of social interaction anxiety, and poorer psychological wellbeing and quality of life.

The Australian Red Cross identified loneliness as a focus of its annual Season of Belonging appeal in 2018. Its survey found that one in two people say they feel they have fewer social connections than a decade ago and only 41 per cent of Australians say they go out of their way to connect with others.

Studies like these indicate how loneliness has a deep and profound impact on health and wellbeing. However, there is a lack of attention towards what loneliness and social isolation mean for workers.

1 <https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-government-wide-drive-to-tackle-loneliness>

3 <https://psychweek.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Psychology-Week-2018-Australian-Loneliness-Report.pdf>

# The changing Australian workplace experience has implications for social connection

## The Australian workplace experience is changing at pace.

How and when Australians do their work is changing significantly. Almost two in five Australian workers are spending more time in front of a screen at their workplace than 12 months ago. One in three are spending more time working individually on projects. Almost one in three Australian workers are spending more time working outside of their usual business hours than they were 12 months ago.

Reventure's recent research, *Precarious Work Insights* (2018),<sup>4</sup> found that the Australian job market itself is shifting dramatically. More than two in five Australian workers feel insecure about their current workplace arrangement. The greatest perceived benefit of the casualisation of the Australian workforce is flexibility (42%) but the greatest risk of casualisation for individuals is financial instability (59%) and the lack of leave benefits (59%). One of the greatest risks of moving to more casualisation of work is unpredictable hours, leading to decreasing workers' ability to commit (57%).

## Workers' expectations of their workplaces have shifted dramatically.

In our recent report, *Best in Class* (2018),<sup>5</sup> we surveyed senior leaders at leading organisations in Australia. We discovered that the design of work is changing, and leading organisations create environments for their people to allow them to succeed and

flourish. Many leaders in best in class organisations think holistically about their workplaces, in terms of not only business outputs but also the physical workspace.

Flexible, collaborative and productive workplaces are the new normal. Workers in modern workplaces need to be supported in their professional and personal lives to produce good work. Our previous research, *Renewing Australian Workplaces* (2017),<sup>6</sup> found that a solid understanding of what contributes to effective working relationships, is crucial. Our report confirmed that without this understanding, workplaces will continue to waste money on superficial strategies that do not solve the problems associated with poor workplace relationships.

## The workplace is a critical community for Australian workers.

Our workplaces play a thought-provoking role in our lives. Our research confirms that work is becoming *the* new community. It is where we spend most of our waking time and, with the rise of technology, it has become more difficult to detach ourselves from our work 'out of hours'. Work is about the people, feeling respected, cared for and having the opportunity to care for others. It is about being recognised for your worth and your inherent value as a human being.

The workplace clearly provides a sense of community for Australian workers. Almost two in five Australian workers

(37%) have felt lonely or somewhat lonely at work in the past 12 months. Whereas an even larger proportion of Australian workers (48%) sometimes feel lonely outside of work.

Purpose and meaning are playing an increasingly important role in the contemporary workforce. Our previous research, *Delivering Purpose and Meaning* (2017),<sup>7</sup> found that 77 per cent of millennials are looking for purpose and meaning in their work and want their workplaces to assist them to contextualise their work in a bigger narrative and integrate their life goals. Workers expect their workplaces to foster a sense of belonging.



**37% of workers have felt lonely or somewhat lonely at work in the past 12 months.**



**48% of workers sometimes feel lonely outside of work.**





### **Ways of working continue to evolve, and modern workplace interventions have not adapted to address workplace loneliness.**

More than two in five Australian workers (43%) typically work in an open plan workplace, making it the most common workplace experience. However, surprisingly, almost half of workers (47%) spend more time working alone with only minimal or some interaction with other people.

There has been a significant shift in organisations throughout the world towards creating open plan workplaces which have dedicated collaboration spaces. However, our study has found that the physical environment does not necessarily impact a worker's experience of workplace loneliness. Workers experiencing workplace loneliness are equally as likely as workers not experiencing workplace loneliness to work within an open plan workplace (43%, 43%). This finding presents an interesting challenge for HR managers and others who are tasked with the responsibility to drive workplace cultures that foster social cohesion.

Organisations know all too well that workplace retention continues to be a challenge for the average Australian workplace, with an average tenure of just two years and nine months.<sup>8</sup> Our study has discovered a correlation between workplace loneliness and retention. More than two in five Australian workers (43%) will definitely or probably look for a new job in the next 12 months. Of these workers, Generation Z (56%) and Generation Y (53%) workers anticipate looking for a new job in the next 12 months (cf. 37% Gen X, 23% Baby Boomers). So, it seems that open plan offices are not the panacea for this growing public health and workplace epidemic.

Notwithstanding this, the amount of interaction within the workplace does impact a worker's experience of loneliness. Australian workers experiencing loneliness in the workplace are 1.5 times as likely to spend more time working alone than interacting with others in the workplace (60% cf. 39% workers not experiencing loneliness). Interestingly, they are more than twice as likely as workers not experiencing workplace loneliness to look for a new job (definitely/probably) in the next 12 months (65% cf. 29%).



**Lonely workers are twice as likely to look for a new job in the next 12 months.**

# Loneliness is the new reality in Australian workplaces

## **Precarious work and the gig economy have contributed to socially disconnected workplaces.**

Our *Precarious Work Insights* (2018) report found that an increasingly casualised workforce in Australia, aided by the growing strength of the ‘gig economy’, has made more Australian workers feel insecure about their jobs than ever before. Connected to this, Australian workers’ stress levels in relation to expectations of them in the workplace are at an all-time high. These findings are deeply troubling.

This increase in precarious work has not only generated stress, anxiety and uncertainty, but has also caused significant implications for personal and professional relationships, and social cohesion more broadly. Human resources consulting service specialists, Converge International, found in 2012 that the major reason Australian workers seek counselling through their Employee Assistance services was to better manage their relationships at work and at home.

It is easy to use the gig economy and organisations that leverage casualised labour as scapegoats for the growing loneliness epidemic. But this blame game is futile. All workplaces must realise that loneliness is a new reality in Australia and seek to redress this.

## **Loneliness reduces job and life satisfaction.**

Our lives are inextricably connected to our workplaces. Half of Australian workers’ waking hours are spent in the workplace, at 40 hours per week over 48 weeks per year. It is therefore critical to understand how loneliness fundamentally influences workers’ sentiment towards and experience of their workplaces.

Four in five Australian workers (80%) know what is expected of them in their role at work (strongly/somewhat agree). More than three in five (63%) are satisfied in their role at work and their personal relationships (62%). These are positive reflections of Australian workplaces.

If we delve beneath the surface, there are some concerning insights. Only half of Australian workers (50%) strongly or somewhat agree they participate in enough physical activity in a week while just over two in five (46%) agree they get enough sleep each night. It appears that workers and their workplaces have not achieved a balance between job satisfaction and personal health and wellbeing.

A clear misalignment between job satisfaction and wellbeing manifests when we unpack experiences of loneliness in the workplace. Only half of workers experiencing loneliness (49%) are satisfied in their role at work compared to more than seven in ten workers (72%) who are not experiencing loneliness. Workers experiencing

loneliness are less likely to know what is expected of them in their role at work than workers not experiencing loneliness (72% cf. 85%).

## **Only half of workers experiencing loneliness are satisfied in their role at work.**

### **The construction of ‘work’ and increased workloads have contributed to this loneliness epidemic.**

The *2019 Australian Workplace Psychological Safety Survey (2)* surveyed 1,093 Australian employees and found that just under a quarter (23%) do not currently do any activities to connect them with colleagues. One of the biggest barriers found was not having time due to workload.<sup>9</sup> A clear learning from this is that there is a need for workplaces to be “psychologically safe where there is a climate of interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people feel comfortable being themselves and to ask for help.”

Positively, the leaders interviewed in our *Best in Class* (2018) report predicted that even with the increasing use of technology in the workplace, collaboration will still be essential in workplaces of the future. One of the interviewed leaders, Louise Baxter, Chief Executive Officer of Starlight Children’s Foundation, commented, “the modern workplace is already here.

9 <https://www.ruok.org.au/workloads-affecting-australian-workers-ability-to-connect-with-colleagues>



It is flexible, diverse and brings people and the organisation together.” Louise also predicted that in three to five years’ time, the modern workplace will be a place where people will continue to want to work with each other. Dedicated collaboration spaces, she predicted, will foster cross-collaborative teams. This prediction and the insights we gained from other leaders of Australia’s outstanding organisations provide some hope for turning around the loneliness problem in our workplaces.

**Meaningful relationships exist between colleagues, but there is an imperative to actively foster social connection in the workplace.**

Many Australian workers have colleagues who are trusted friends. Four in five Australian workers (80% definitely/somewhat) experience meaningful interactions with their colleagues in the workplace. More than seven in ten (72%) have colleagues who are trusted friends, while more than two in three (68%) interact socially with their colleagues during the week. If this is the case, why are Australian workers experiencing loneliness?

Australian workers are slightly less likely to have meaningful interactions with their manager (72%) or have managers who focus on fostering a socially connected workplace (66%). It appears leaders are not playing their part in fostering socially connected workplaces, instead placing the onus on workers to take the initiative to connect with their colleagues.

**Employers have a vastly different workplace experience to workers.**

Employers are more likely than workers to have meaningful interactions with managers (80% cf. 67%). This top-down relationship, rather than bottom-up relationship, may contribute to employers being more likely than workers to say they have managers who focus on fostering a socially connected workplace (75% cf. 61%). It is also interesting to note that employers are more likely than workers to have colleagues who are trusted friends (81% cf. 68%).

However, while employers are more likely to report higher levels of social connectedness, they still experience a higher level of workplace loneliness than workers (44% cf. 33% workers).

**Age makes a difference when it comes to willingness to interact and experience interactions in the workplace.**

Younger workers are more likely to be sociable in the workplace. Three quarters of Generation Z (77%) and Generation Y (73%) workers have social interactions with their colleagues during the week compared to three in five Gen X (64%) and Baby Boomer (58%) workers.

Younger generation workers are also more likely to say they have managers who focus on fostering socially connected workers (74% Gen Z, 72% Gen Y cf. 60% Gen X, 58% Baby Boomers).

However, although younger Australian workers are more likely to be sociable in the workplace, they are also more likely to experience loneliness in the workplace (45% Gen Z, 47% Gen Y) than their older colleagues (33% Gen X, 19% Baby Boomers). Younger workers are also more likely to sometimes feel lonely outside of work (58% Gen Z, 54% Gen Y cf. 44% Gen X, 37% Baby Boomers).

**Young Australian workers are more likely to experience loneliness in the workplace and outside of work.**

**Managers play a pivotal role in workers’ experiences of workplace loneliness.**

Satisfied workers are twice as likely to have meaningful interactions with their managers. Satisfied workers are also more likely to have meaningful interactions with their managers (79% cf. 34%) and colleagues (85% cf. 57%). They are also more than twice as likely to have a manager who focuses on fostering a socially connected workplace than dissatisfied workers (73% cf. 30%).

# Loneliness has a deep impact on personal wellbeing and workplace cohesion

## **Loneliness in the workplace does not go unnoticed.**

More than a quarter of Australian workers (26%) notice people in their workplace experiencing loneliness. Moreover, more than one in five Australian workers (23%) believe loneliness can negatively impact their workplace (strongly/somewhat agree). This epidemic is not only apparent to workers. Employers are more likely than employees to see the negative impacts of loneliness on their workplace (31% cf. 19% strongly/somewhat agree).

The experience of loneliness can make an individual more aware of it. Workers who have experienced workplace loneliness are more likely to recognise others in their workplace who experience loneliness (44% cf. 16%), and the subsequent negative impacts on their workplace (43% cf. 12%).

## **Workers who experience workplace loneliness suffer from significant consequences.**

Almost half of Australian workers who have experienced workplace loneliness say they are more likely to withdraw from their colleagues (49%), their overall wellbeing suffers (47%) and they are less engaged with the workplace vision and values (46%). The personal toll loneliness takes on workers does not end here. Around two in five Australian workers feel less productive (40%), and are more likely to make mistakes at work (38%) or get sick (36%).

Employees who experience loneliness find they are more likely to get sick (49% cf. 26%), are less engaged with the workplace vision and values (56%

cf. 38%) and are more likely to make mistakes than employees who are not experiencing loneliness in their workplace (47% cf. 31%).

## **Workplace loneliness is not only about being socially disconnected; it is also about being the 'only' in your workplace.**

Workplaces around the world are not only facing a loneliness epidemic, but many of their workers face experiences of 'onliness'. Women, particularly women of diverse cultural backgrounds, tend to experience anxiety and pressure from being the 'only' in their workplace, whether it is in a project team or a senior executive team.

McKinsey noted in their report, *One is the loneliest number* (2019), 20 per cent of women experience an 'only' moment when they are the only female in a room. For women of colour, the number rose to 45 per cent. In fact, women are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace than men, but being the only woman is an even worse experience. The effects are far-reaching. When women are alone in a group of men at work, they are more likely than others to have their judgement questioned than women working in a more gender balanced environment (49% cf. 32%), to be mistaken for someone more junior (35% cf. 15%), and to be subjected to unprofessional and demeaning remarks (24% cf. 14%). The research also discovered a concerning reality, that women who experience 'onliness' are more likely to contemplate leaving their jobs (25%) than other women (17%) and employees overall (19%).

## **Leaders and HR are not doing enough to address and reduce workplace loneliness.**

Australian workers are calling out for their leaders to end workplace loneliness. They believe workplace culture should promote social engagement.

There is a breakdown in trust between workers and HR. Australian workers are least likely to feel comfortable speaking to human resources (9%) about relationship concerns at work. Trusted colleagues, rather than those with responsibility in the organisation, are the first port of call for relationship concerns at work (32%).

Almost one in four Australian workers (24%) will speak with their leader while 10 per cent will speak with a member of the leadership team. This distrust is concerning as HR are often responsible for designing and implementing initiatives in the workplace.

## **It is incumbent on workplaces to support their workers.**

Workers experiencing loneliness are clearly looking to their workplace for support. More than half of workers experiencing loneliness agree (strongly/somewhat) that it is HR's responsibility to foster a socially connected workplace (51% cf. 35% not experiencing loneliness). Similarly, almost half agree that a leader at work is responsible for whether someone in the team feels lonely (50% cf. 35%).



Workers who  
have experienced  
workplace  
loneliness are  
**more likely**  
to recognise  
loneliness in  
colleagues.

# Workplace solutions must shift the focus from the ‘worker experience’ to the ‘human experience’



## Start with recognising that there are workers who feel lonely.

Let's start with recognising that loneliness is real and exists in the community and in workplaces.

Therefore, we need to avoid adding this to a list of unspoken mental health ‘stigmas’. Feeling lonely is very subjective and personal so there is a need to have an open and connected conversation that says it is real and there are solutions that the workplace can provide.

## Workplaces will play a leading role in shaping socially connected workplaces for the future.

Transformation will require buy in from senior level leadership.

Workplaces big and small play a unique role in ascribing meaning to what workers do each day. They must create values that give their people a sense of belonging to something of worth and meaning. Workplaces should also foster trust in their people that their leaders are making the right decisions, and enable people to develop strong, deep and genuine relationships with their colleagues.

Deloitte identified in their *Global Human Capital Trends (2019)* report that one of the biggest challenges for organisations in 2019 is the ‘worker experience’. 84 per cent of their survey respondents rated this issue as important, and 28 per cent identified it as one of the three most urgent issues facing their organisation in 2019. Australian workplaces are not alone in facing a workplace loneliness epidemic which underscores the

‘worker experience’. The epidemic is intimidating, but not insurmountable. The key is to do something – now – to start eroding this concerning trend. It is now time for the workplace to be a key part of the solution. The focus must now be on the ‘human experience’, not simply the ‘worker experience’.

## The most effective solutions address meaningful connections and negative thinking patterns.

Australian workers believe the most effective strategies to reduce workplace loneliness are providing opportunities to develop meaningful connections with team members (63%) and working with individuals to change negative thinking patterns (62%). While these two approaches are seen to be most effective, very few Australian workplaces (11%) incorporate these strategies into their workplace.

We need to move away from transactional encounters in the workplace to relational encounters. Our research goes to the very core of Boston Consulting Group's report, *The Head, Heart, and Hands of Transformation (2018)*, which recognises that workers are more than transactional beings used to achieve higher profits and results. The report states that if real transformation is to be successful in this new era it will require a holistic, human-centric approach. Moreover, if humans are to be ‘fully human’ there needs to be a resounding new approach to the way we view our work, our relationships and whole of life encounters.

## So what should workplaces do?

### Raise awareness.

Raise awareness about the emotional impact of loneliness and start the conversation. It is important to create an environment where conversations about mental health issues are commonplace and normalised. If this is achieved, then there can be momentum and change about attitudes to mental health and these can be positively reinforced and valued.

### Prioritise wellness in your wellbeing programs.

Our research in *Workplace Wellbeing (2017)* found that Australian workers expect workplaces to provide overall wellbeing and wellness programs (36%). More than half of Australian workers see the wellbeing program offered in their workplace as effective at combatting loneliness. In fact, more than one in four workers would sacrifice company perks for better wellbeing in their workplace.



### **Prioritise social connectedness from the start.**

All leaders and HR practitioners know that effective onboarding is a critical component of the employee lifecycle. It has direct flow-on effects for employee engagement and retention. People leaders in workplaces must also understand that the onboarding process is an important first step in mitigating loneliness for new starters and, in fact, can curb the workplace loneliness trend. Leaders responsible for onboarding should make every effort to ensure strategic pairing between new starters and current employees. For example, pairing an introverted new starter with an extroverted colleague, who is well connected with people throughout the organisation, will be an ideal way to help them immediately start to forge connections with their new colleagues. It is an easy 'in' for new starters.



### **Focus on values.**

An easy place to start for workplaces wanting to end workplace loneliness is to start, or continue to deepen, a conversation around the organisation's values and purpose. But it is imperative to include workers in this narrative. A conversation and collaboration around shared meaning and the creation of something that has a vision and shared outcomes helps individuals find meaning in their own work and diminishes their sense of isolation. This solution was confirmed in Harvard Business Review's study, *America's Loneliest Workers, According to Research* (2018) which found that a shared sense of meaning with colleagues amplifies the positive effects of social support.



### **Create and foster a culture which encourages kindness and compassion.**

A return to kindness and compassion is essential. Workplaces must encourage their people to demonstrate more compassion and kindness at work. This is not a matter of 'going soft' and prioritising soft skills, but instead understanding how kindness has far-reaching effects on curbing workplace loneliness. Australian workers (31%) believe workplaces should facilitate a culture of engagement and social interaction to reduce loneliness in the workplace.

Leaders have a role to play in developing this culture, and their influence is extensive. Emotional intelligence is widely recognised a key leadership skill, and one which should be actively developed. Amongst other attributes, a leader with high emotional intelligence demonstrates self-awareness, social skills and empathy for others. These attributes are critical in role modelling and encouraging human connection in the workplace through demonstrating how to build relationships and support others.

Oxford University found in their 2017 study that performing acts of kindness increases the overall well-being of the person performing the act along with adding emotionally to the receiver. Clearly, the impact of being kind has a substantial and measurable effect on wellbeing for all. Through helping others, the study found, we increase our own happiness, life-satisfaction, strength of our relationships and social

connections, and boost our positivity. Overall, life becomes more enjoyable. Work becomes more fulfilling.

A strong organisational culture which fosters positive social interactions and expression of emotions is critical to this. Harvard Business Review found in its study, *The Painful Cycle of Employee Loneliness, and How it Hurts Companies* (2018), that a stronger versus weaker emotional culture of compassionate love, featuring expressions of caring, compassion and kindness, weakens the negative relationships between workplace loneliness and commitment to the organisation. Ultimately, the organisation and its workers benefit from a culture of compassion and kindness.


We must all strive to be better neighbours, friends and colleagues.




### **Incorporate solutions that cater for all age groups.**

All generations believe workplaces should provide wellbeing programs and opportunities for social interaction during work. The generations do, however, have different expectations for additional approaches workplaces should take. For example, relational connection is more important to younger workers.

Gen Z are the most likely to believe an employer should, to help reduce workplace loneliness, provide buddy relationships (27%) and increase opportunities for social interaction outside of work (38%). Gen X, however, are the most likely to believe workplaces should provide mentor relationships (35%).


 **Include employees in designing solutions.**

Employees have a role to play designing such initiatives to ensure that they are appropriate for the particular culture and wellness needs of their workplace. All areas of well-being must be considered, including improving health, creating work/life harmony and fostering social connectedness. By putting people at the centre of the design process, these areas can be explored and authentic solutions created.


 **Increase opportunities for social interaction during work.**

Australian workers believe workplaces should increase opportunities for social interaction during work (35%). Workers experiencing workplace loneliness are more likely to believe workplaces should intentionally work towards more collaboration (31% cf. 20% not experiencing workplace loneliness).


The challenge is for workplaces to foster collaboration in a time when there is such a heavy reliance on technology for communication, with many workers communicating via email and online platforms such as Yammer.

 **Celebrate team members' achievements in person.**


There is an appetite for workplaces to celebrate team members' achievements in person, with 34 per cent of Australian workers seeing this solution as one which will help reduce loneliness in the workplace. While we need to find ways to celebrate the big wins at work, there is also high value to include the small and personal wins that send a message that individuals matter and that they are valuable contributors.

 **Foster a collaborative learning culture.**

Even though workplaces are increasingly relying on technology and automation of routine processes, people are still the critical component in most organisations. Leaders must create, foster and encourage a culture of shared learning as an important mechanism for allowing people to engage in discussion. Leaders need to role model behaviours that involve being available and happy to help their team members. This in turn will be followed by the team and a culture of social engagement and shared learning will perpetuate. The critical component of this, however, is to ensure that social interaction through this avenue is genuine and not just transactional or tokenistic for the purposes of ad hoc training, learning and development.

 **Include remote workers.**

It is important to actively include team members who work remotely, supplementing technology with a genuine human connection. But this cannot be a tokenistic initiative. Instead, it must be a genuine attempt to foster social connectedness. Invite your remote team members to set the agenda for meetings to ensure they feel active participants in the meeting, rather than passive participants at the end of the phone line or on the screen. This will also demonstrate leaders' trust in them and will encourage them to be more outspoken in meetings.

 **Identify 'champions' for social connectedness.**

It is important to identify 'champions' to ensure that the organisation establishes a clear direction and intent to address loneliness at work. These champions can be accountable to keep the organisation on track and to monitor progress. Recruiting 'champions' is a way to support others and assist in getting the message out across the organisation that it is doing something that addresses and supports workers who may be feeling vulnerable and alone.





# Conclusion

Australian workplaces are continuing to evolve, at pace. We have witnessed some noteworthy developments in our workplaces in recent times, including increased support for flexible working practices, a renewed focus on organisational values, the transformation of the HR function and the implementation of new technologies to enhance productivity.

Leaders and HR managers have worked diligently to equip their organisations with the skills to adapt with agility to these emerging trends. However, workers throughout Australia are calling out for their leaders and the decision makers in their organisations to refashion workplace cultures to one critical characteristic – human.

The human experience appears to be lost in Australian workplaces. Australian workers expect workplaces to provide social connectedness, but this expectation has not been met. Decision makers in our organisations need to appreciate that their workplaces can and should provide opportunities for social interaction to help reduce loneliness in the workplace.

It is everyone's responsibility to end the epidemic. Researchers have provided evidence on the detrimental effects of loneliness on physical and mental health. Australian workers spend more than half of their waking hours at work, so let's start with our workplaces. It is now up to all of us – leaders, HR managers and colleagues – to curb this significant public health issue.

So, what can we do about it? Simple and practical workplace initiatives should be strategically implemented in workplaces to raise awareness about the issue. But initiatives must also go further, they must foster connectedness, sustain momentum and end workplace loneliness. Solutions must acknowledge generational differences and focus on the 'human experience' – social connection and interaction, kindness and compassion, values, wellness, celebration, inclusivity and collaboration. This is the way forward for healthy, connected Australian workplaces.

Together, we need to empower our colleagues and those who can do something about the issue in Australian workplaces. This is not an insurmountable challenge, but we must act now.



# Methodology and Demographics

## Research Objectives.

Reventure commissioned the *Workplace Loneliness* report in March 2019. The report unpacks loneliness as a growing health public health epidemic and its implications for Australian workplaces. The purpose of this report is to understand experiences of workplace loneliness and the implications of loneliness for Australian workplaces. Importantly, this report presents practical workplace solutions for leaders and HR representatives to reduce and end loneliness in their workplaces.

## Research Methodology.

The *Workplace Loneliness* report is the collation of data obtained through a quantitative survey conducted with an online panel. The survey was in field from 15 March to 21 March 2019. The survey was completed by a nationally representative sample of 1,010 employed Australians aged 18-65 years.

The following question was asked of 1,875 respondents. Only those who indicated they were employed 'full-time', 'part-time/casual' or 'self-employed/independent contractor' were able to progress. The total number of respondents to complete the survey was 1,010.

## Graphs and rounding.

Data labels on the graphs in this report have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may, therefore sum to 99% or 101%. Any calculations where two data points have been added are based on raw data (not the data labels on the graph) which have been rounded once combined.

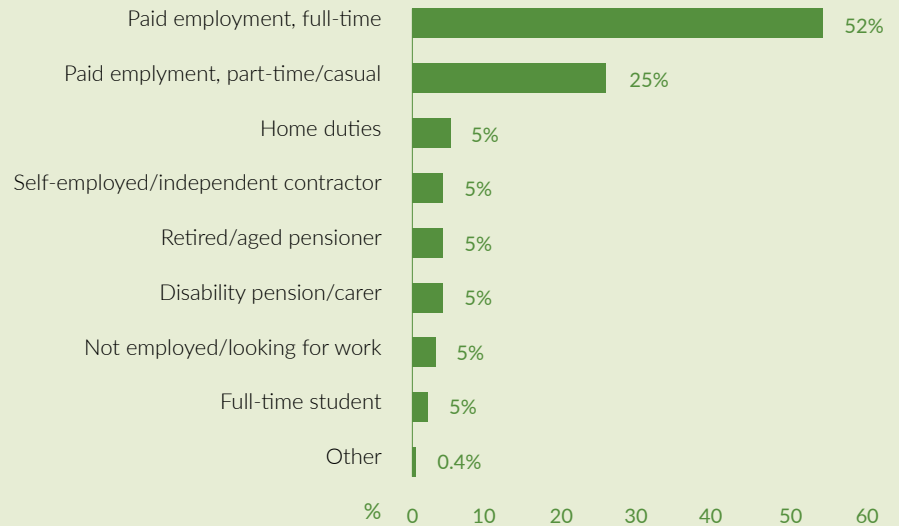
## Terminology and segmentation throughout the report.

Generational insights in the *Workplace Loneliness* report are based on the following:

- Generation Z: aged 18 to 24 (those born from 1995-2008)
- Generation Y: aged 25 to 39 (those born from 1980-1994)
- Generation X: aged 40 to 54 (those born from 1965-1979)
- Baby Boomers: aged 55 to 65 (those born from 1954-1964)

In this report, several segmentation filters are applied to understand the results. Filters used include type of role and loneliness at work. The questions and response options used to develop the segmentation filters include:

### Which of the following best describes your employment status?



### What is your role within your workplace?

Segment name	Question and option/s chosen	% of Australian workers
Employers	'Owner and manager', 'Owner but not manager' and 'Manager but not owner'	38%
Workers	'No, not really' and 'No, not at all'	62%

### Have you experienced the following in the past 12 months, "Sometimes I feel lonely at work"?

Segment name	Question and option/s chosen	% of Australian workers
Workers experiencing workplace loneliness	'Yes, definitely' and 'Yes, somewhat'	37%
Workers not experiencing workplace loneliness	'No, not really' and 'No, not at all'	63%



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